

Sometimes my heart is being unfaithful

"You don't know what you got till it's gone."

TUI

The last client of the day, a burly man with a fresh, wrapped dragon coiling across his shoulder blade, grunted his farewell. I watched the studio door swing shut behind him, then turned back to my station. The scent of antiseptic and ink, a familiar comfort, hung thick in the air. I wiped down the leather chair, the metal trays, each tool returned to its sterile home. Just as I reached for the floor, My phone emitted a cheerful and insistent beep.

I answered without looking at the caller ID, my mind still on the intricate scales of the dragon. "Ink & Ashes, Tui speaking."

"Tui!" Nut's voice, usually a rapid-fire assault of enthusiasm, softened, warming the line. "I just saw Est's portfolio. The one you sent over."

My hand froze mid-wipe. My pulse quickened, a frantic bird flapping against my ribs. "And?" I managed, the word a tight squeeze past my suddenly dry throat.

"It's very good." Nut's tone held genuine surprise, an almost reverent quality. "Intimate. It's not the kind of flashy photography we usually see. It's human."

"And?" I pressed, leaning closer to the receiver, every muscle in my body tensing.

"And." Nut said slowly, drawing out the word, making me want to scream. "the publisher is looking for someone to handle author photos, concepts for book covers, event photography for launches. We need someone who can capture the story in a frame. Not just a pretty picture." Silence stretched, taut as a pulled thread. I held my breath, my knuckles white where I gripped the phone.

"We'd like to offer Est a contract." Nut finally said, the words a gentle release of all the tension I hadn't known I was holding. "To start with, as a freelancer. Artist portraits next week, and then we'll reevaluate. The pay is decent, enough to cover his part-time salary, plus a little extra. And Tui..." The silence lasted for a moment. I held my breath.

"Yes?" My voice cracked.

"If he does well, it will become a recurring gig. We've been looking for this. Someone who sees beyond the lens, you know? Someone who can capture the artist, not just the art. Est has a way of making people feel seen."

I closed my eyes. A feeling of relief, so sudden and profound, washed over me. It tightened my throat, burning behind my eyelids.

"He'll be delighted." I managed to say, the words a whisper. A laugh, thick with unshed tears, bubbled up. "He'll be absolutely delighted."

"Good." Nut said, his voice bright again. "Send him our way. The details are in the email I just sent you. Tell him congratulations from the whole team."

"I will. Thank you, Nut. Really."

"Don't thank me. Thank Est. And thank you for pushing his work. I knew you saw something special in him."

The line went dead. I stood there, phone still pressed to my ear, a wide, unbidden smile stretching my lips. My heart soared, a lightness I hadn't felt in months. I walked over to the computer, my fingers trembling slightly as I clicked on the new email. The official offer. The project details. The payment terms. It was all there. I printed it, the soft whir of the printer a triumphant fanfare. This was it. This was his break.

The doorbell chimed, a sharp sound that cut through the jazz playing softly from the speakers. Est entered, shoulders slumped, a dark smudge under his left eye. His exhaustion hung around him like a heavy cloak, but when his gaze met mine, his eyes lit up, chasing away the shadows. I didn't respond to his silent query. Instead, I held out the printed email, the crisp white paper. He took it, his fingers brushing mine, the paper crinkling softly. He read, his brow furrowing, then smoothing. A slow, disbelieving smile spread across his face, pushing the fatigue lines away. He looked up, his voice hoarse, thick with emotion.

"You are the worst at letting me fail."

I walked to the mini-fridge, pulling out two chilled coffees. "And you." I replied, turning back to him. "are the worst at believing you deserve to succeed."

I watched him, a quiet pride swelling in my chest. He was still staring at the paper, as if it might vanish. I looked out the window, the city lights beginning to prickle the twilight sky. Then my gaze drifted to the walls, lined with my own art, each tattoo a story, each a photograph waiting to be taken.

"You're nervous." I observed.

Est exhaled sharply, a long, shaky breath. "I don't want to mess this up."

"You won't." I handed him a coffee, the cold can a welcome anchor. "You've been preparing for this since the day you stepped off that bus with a broken camera."

He took the cup, his fingers brushing mine again, a brief spark of contact. A beat of silence stretched between us, filled only by the low thrum of the city outside. Then, softer, almost a whisper, "I wouldn't have made it this far without you."

I looked away, suddenly aware of the weight of the moment, the raw vulnerability in his voice. My chin tucked in, a familiar discomfort rising. "You would've. It just would've taken longer."

He exhaled, long and slow, like he'd been holding his breath for years. Then, suddenly, he moved, pulling me into a hug – firm, unguarded, the kind of embrace that said thank you without words. I stiffened for a second, a reflex, before relaxing into it, my hands finding his back, patting gently. My chin rested briefly on his shoulder, the scent of his worn jacket a familiar comfort. He smelled of old paper and city dust.

The embrace breaks and I take a step back, a rehearsed retreat, a habit honed by years of keeping my distance. Est's arms reluctantly separate, his smile fading as I turn toward the sink, suddenly very interested in washing my hands. I rub my palms together, and the soap creates little white clouds.

I feel Est's gaze on my back, laden with something unsaid. The silence lingers, filled with all the things I don't dare say. "Tui." Est's voice is cautious, as if approaching something fragile. "Are you okay?"

I turn off the tap. Drying my hands with deliberate precision. "Fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you're doing that."

"Doing what?"

"That thing where you help someone get exactly what they need and then pretend it didn't cost you anything to do it."

"Est." The voice sounds like a whip crack. I turn around and my expression is carefully blank, the same mask I use with difficult clients, in conversations with his family, and in all the moments when he decides to be okay. "I'm happy for you. Really. Now I have to finish closing up."

Est flinches as if he's been hit. "Okay," he says quietly. "Okay." But he doesn't leave. Instead, he leaves his coffee untouched on the table and picks up his camera bag. "I'll let you close up," he says, measuring each word. "Thanks for the job. Really." The door closes behind him with a soft click, without anger, which somehow makes it worse.

I am left alone in the studio, surrounded by evidence of his art: needles and ink, stories engraved forever on skin. I look at my hands, still damp from washing, and think of all the things I have had and refused to keep.

In the supply closet, I find Hong organizing ink by color—a task that's definitely not

necessary at 10 p.m. Hong looks up and gives me a small, knowing smile.

"Tough day?" Hong asks.

"No." I lean against the doorframe. "Actually, it's been a good day. Est got a job."

"That's great." Hong goes back to work, but there is softness in his voice. "You must be proud."

"I am."

Hong sets down a bottle of black ink. He turns to face me. "But?"

I exhale a long sigh. "But nothing. I'm fine."

"You keep saying that word." Hong observes quietly. "Fine. It doesn't seem to be very true."

I don't answer. I watch Hong work, carefully placing each color, each bottle in its place. There is something meditative about it: the way Hong creates order out of chaos, the way he finds peace in small, repetitive tasks. "Do you think I'm selfish?" I ask suddenly.

Hong looks up, surprised. "No."

"But do you think I use helping others as a way to feel better about myself?"

Hong reflects on this with the seriousness that characterizes him in most things. "I think," he says slowly, "that you've been the person who fixes things for a long time. For Est. For your family. And I think it's become such an important part of who you are that you've forgotten how to be anything else."

"So yes. I'm selfish."

"No." Hong quits his job and approaches me. "Being selfish is knowingly hurting other people for your own gain. What you do is... protect yourself. You protect yourself by making yourself indispensable. By being the person who has all the answers."

My chest tightens. "I don't..."

"When Lego came yesterday." Hong continues quietly, interrupting me. "Did you know? He was exhausted, almost crying. And instead of letting you see that, they smiled and chatted because they didn't want to overwhelm you."

"That's not my fault..."

"It's not." Hong nods. "But it is. Because you've created a dynamic where people feel like they can't show you their pain. Like they have to be strong for you."

I turn away, unable to hold Hong's gaze. "I don't know how to be any other way."

"Then maybe." Hong says quietly, "it's time to learn."

The minutes tick by. His feet don't move. Because it's the truth. For a long time, what he wanted has been intertwined with what others needed from him. He wanted Est to succeed. He wanted to be the stable, reliable person. But somewhere along the way, the line between desire and obligation blurred until it became unrecognizable.

The message arrives a minute later:

Est

Hi. I know you're tired. I just wanted to say thank you. Really. Not just politely, but truly. Because you believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. And that means everything to me. So... thank you. See you later.

I close my eyes and sigh, then Hong speaks again. "Don't take it so seriously, we're all learning as we go." Puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "I shouldn't have said those things." Hong says bluntly. "It's not my place."

"I asked." I replied.

"Maybe. But I wasn't nice."

"Nut keeps trying to get closer." Hong continues quietly. "And I keep pushing him away. Not because I don't want him to get close, but because I'm afraid that if he really gets to know me, he'll leave me. So I become someone small, distant, and hard to hurt."

"It's not the same..."

"It's exactly the same." Hong finally looks me in the eye. "We're both afraid. And we both use different tactics to manage that fear."

"How do we stop?"

"I don't know." Hong admits. "But I think it starts with saying the things we're afraid to say. Letting people see us when we are not being useful, strong or necessary."

"That sounds scary."

"It is." Hong smiles, small and sad. "But I think it's also the only way to really connect with someone. Not as a version of ourselves, but as the real thing."

EST

The bell over Ink & Ashes rang, bright and too cheerful for how heavy my body felt.

I stepped inside like I was made of wet clothes—everything clinging, everything pulling. My shoulders ached from carrying my camera bag all day. My eyes burned from staring at screens, from pretending I wasn't counting coins in my head, from rehearsing worst-case scenarios so often they'd started to sound like prayers. I was so tired the world had started to feel like a badly focused photograph—edges soft, colors washed out. The familiar scent of antiseptic and ink wrapped around me. Safe. Clean.

I'd slept maybe three hours. The kind of sleep where you keep waking up because your brain refuses to believe you're safe.

My legs ached from walking. My shoulders hurt from carrying the weight of a camera bag that was starting to feel heavier than my future. Then I saw him. Tui, standing by his desk, the glow from the computer haloing his hair. He looked up when I stepped in. Something in his face shifted—just a fraction—but he didn't say anything. He didn't tease me about looking half-dead or ask why I hadn't answered his last text.

Instead, he held out a sheet of paper.

I blinked, thrown off. For a crazy second I thought it was some sort of bill, or maybe a new design he wanted me to look at. But when I stepped closer, the world narrowed to black ink on white.

I read the first paragraph. Then the second. My eyes started to sting halfway down the page.

This... wasn't a rejection. It wasn't a maybe later. It was a yes.

My throat went dry. The words on the page blurred. My voice scraped its way out, hoarse and disbelieving. "You." I said, hearing the tremor. "are the worst at letting me fail."

It wasn't accusation. It was gratitude, wrapped in the only armor I knew: sarcasm.

Tui's mouth twitched, that almost-smile that never quite committed. He turned to the mini-fridge like this was just any other day. "And you." he said, pulling out two cans of coffee. "are the worst at believing you deserve to succeed."

The ridiculous thing was—he said it so casually. Like it was fact, not kindness. Like he was reading a label I couldn't see. I looked down at the paper again. A contract. Not a one-off gig. Not a favor. An actual, proper job. Enough to stop pretending every unpaid shoot was "good exposure" instead of desperation.

Tui moved to the window, gaze drifting to the bruised-purple sky beyond the glass. City lights were starting to flicker on, one by one, like someone was slowly plugging in the stars. Then his eyes traced the studio walls, the framed flash designs, the

healed tattoo photos, the sketches taped up with washi tape. I'd always loved this room—the way it felt lived-in but deliberate, messy in the way artists are when they actually finish things.

"You're nervous." he said, not even turning to look at me.

I let out a long breath I didn't know I was holding. It shook more than I wanted it to. "I don't want to mess this up." That was the surface layer. Underneath it was the real fear: What if this is my only chance? What if this confirms what my father decided when he kicked me out—that I'm a bad investment?

"You won't." He said it like that was settled. No doubt. No room for negotiation. He pressed a cold can into my hand. "You've been preparing for this since the day you stepped off that bus with a broken camera." The day he first saw me. The day everything started.

My fingers brushed his as I took the coffee. A small, stupid touch, there and gone in less than a second—but my skin registered it like heat. I swallowed, my chest suddenly too tight for the air I was trying to pull in. A beat of silence stretched between us.

My throat tightened so fast it hurt. That day flashed in my mind the way it always did when I was tired: me with my suitcase, strap biting into my palm; the dorm hallway; the feeling that everyone else had been given instructions I never received. The shame of being older and still not knowing how to exist without apologizing for it. And Tui. Offering food like it didn't cost him anything. Like he wasn't also alone.

"I wouldn't have made it this far without you." I said.

There was a split second where I wanted to snatch the words back, shove them into my mouth, hide them under a laugh. Because saying it out loud meant admitting it—to him, to myself. That his belief had become a kind of scaffolding holding up everything I pretended to stand on alone. Tui looked away. Not in annoyance. Not in dismissal. In something that looked suspiciously like discomfort, like I'd turned a spotlight back on him and he didn't know what to do with it.

"You would've." he said finally, voice softer. His gaze lingered on the window, on the reflected shapes of us against the glass. "It just would've taken longer."

I thought about those "longer" years. Sleeping on friends' couches. Taking pictures in bad light because I couldn't afford proper gear. Working three jobs that all stole time from the one thing I actually wanted to be doing. Maybe he was right. Maybe I would've crawled my way here eventually. But I wouldn't have had this studio to sit in while I did it. I wouldn't have had someone waiting at the end of the day with cold coffee and a printed contract and that stubborn, steady faith in me. I exhaled, and it felt like everything I'd been hoarding—fear, shame, the tight, hard knot of not-enough—spilled out with it. The feeling scared me. It also made me move.

Before I could overthink it, before the familiar voice in my head could say don't make it weird, don't make it too much, I stepped forward and pulled him into a hug. I exhaled, letting go of the breath I felt like I'd been holding since I was eighteen years old. I moved without thinking. I crossed the small distance between us and pulled him into a hug. It wasn't gentle. I didn't know how to do gentle with him. It was full-bodied, all-in, arms wrapped tight around his back like the paper in my hand wasn't the only thing keeping me from falling apart. For a heartbeat, his body went rigid. Reflex. Old habit. The part of him that always pulled back, always stayed just outside the line. Then I felt it—his muscles loosen, his shoulders drop. His hands came up, settling against my back, broad and warm through the thin fabric of my shirt. His chin dipped, resting lightly on my shoulder. He smelled like soap and ink and faint coffee, and something that had become synonymous with safety in my mind. I held him tight. Firm. Unguarded. It was an embrace that tried to say everything I was too coward to speak aloud. Thank you. I see you. Don't go.

He was dismissing his own importance again. Erasure by modesty. I couldn't stand it. Not today. Not when he had just handed me my future on a sheet of printed paper.

Then he broke it. He stepped back, quick and practiced, putting a meter of dead air between us. His smile was gone, replaced by a mask of sudden, frantic busyness. His hands left my back, and I felt the absence like a sudden chill. He retreated with a practiced ease, a movement so smooth it had to be a habit. A habit of leaving before someone could. He turned to the sink and started washing his hands. The water ran loud in the quiet room. He scrubbed his palms with a focus that felt like a rejection. He was washing the moment off his skin. Something hot and painful twisted in my gut. The warmth of the moment evaporated, leaving me cold and exposed. The printed offer in my hand suddenly felt like evidence—not of success, but of a debt I could never repay.

I watched the rigid set of his back. The careful, clinical way he washed. He was building a wall, brick by brick, right in front of me. And I was just supposed to watch.

"Tui." I said, my voice sounding too loud in the sudden distance. "Are you okay?"

He turned off the tap. He dried his hands, finger by finger, every movement precise and distant. "Fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

Because you're doing that thing, I wanted to scream. That thing where you give a piece of yourself away and then pretend you never had it to begin with.

The lie was so smooth it hurt. "Because you're doing that."

He didn't turn around. "Doing what?"

"That thing where you help someone get exactly what they need and then pretend it didn't cost you anything to do it."



I saw his shoulders stiffen. I'd hit a nerve. I wanted him to turn around and yell, or laugh, or tell me I was wrong. Anything but the cold, blank face he showed me when he finally pivoted. His face was a mask—the pleasant, blank, professional mask he used for clients who were being difficult. It was the most painful expression I'd ever seen on him.

"Est." His voice cracked like a whip. It wasn't the Tui who shared his food with me in the dorms. It was Tui the business owner. Tui the adult. Tui the wall. "I'm happy for you. Really. Now I have to finish closing up." I flinched. It felt physical, that shut-down. He was kicking me out. Not just of the studio, but of the moment. I had pushed too hard, gotten too close, and now the door was slamming shut.

"Okay." I said, my voice barely working. "Okay." I looked at the coffee can on the desk. I couldn't drink it. It felt like part of a conversation that had already ended. I picked up my camera bag, the strap digging into my shoulder.

"I'll let you close up." I said, forcing the words out past the lump in my throat. "Thanks for the job. Really." I turned and walked out. The bell above the door jingled—a cheerful sound that felt mocking now. The door clicked shut behind me.

Outside, the night air was cool. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment, staring at the darkened glass of the storefront. I could see his silhouette moving inside, a shadow among the shadows. I wanted to go back in. I wanted to shake him and say, Let me help you for once. But I knew that look on his face. He wouldn't let me in tonight.

I walked home, the city blurring around me. The city at night was a different creature—softer edges, darker shadows. I ended up at the river, watching the lights bleed across the black water. The excitement of the job offer was still there, but it was muted now, wrapped in a dull ache. I kept replaying the hug. The way he relaxed. The way he pulled away.

Why is it so hard for you to let someone else carry the weight?

When I got to my small room, I sat on the edge of the bed, phone in hand. The screen glowed in the dark. I typed a message, deleted it. Typed another. I couldn't leave it like this. I couldn't let him think I didn't appreciate him, or that I was angry. I just wanted him to know. I typed it out, simple and honest.

Hi. I know you're tired. I just wanted to say thank you. Really. Not just politely, but truly. Because you believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. And that means everything to me. So... thank you. See you later.

I hit send. I watched the status change to Delivered.

He wasn't pushing me away because he didn't care. He was pushing me away because he cared too much, and he didn't know how to hold it.

I lay back on the mattress, staring at the ceiling, wondering if he was still at the studio, organizing ink he didn't need to organize, fixing a world that was already broken, all so he wouldn't have to look at the cracks in himself.